CASE STUDY

CUSTOMIZED ACCOUNTABILITY

New key control system resolves potential liability issues at Western Kentucky University

By Ralph C. Jensen

THE GROUNDS CREW, HOUSEKEEPING AND MAINTENANCE STAFF AT WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY USED TO CARRY BUILDING KEYS AROUND WITH THEM 24/7 BECAUSE THAT WAS THE WAY IT HAD ALWAYS BEEN DONE. EMPLOYEES TOOK THE KEYS HOME WITH THEM AT NIGHT AND BROUGHT THEM BACK TO WORK THE NEXT DAY OR FOR THEIR NEXT SHIFT. OTHER THAN THE USUAL FORGETFULNESS AND THE OCCASIONAL SET OF LOST KEYS, MANAGEMENT AND CONTROL OF THE KEYS NEEDED FOR THE MAINTENANCE AND HOUSEKEEPING OF THE UNIVERSITY'S 65-PLUS BUILDINGS WAS NOT ON ANYONE'S RADAR AS A POTENTIAL PROBLEM AREA.

Then, a few minor incidents occurred that exposed the university's liability, sending the manager of Maintenance Services, Charles Harrison, in search of options for improving the department's key control. His search brought Harrison to the Morse Watchmans website where the information he found appeared to be exactly the kind of solution he was looking for: a key management system that would be easy to implement and use—one that would ensure the keys were securely stored when not in use and provide tracking so that users would be accountable.

The Morse Watchmans key control and management systems are designed so that only pre-authorized users can access the cabinet and remove or return specific keys. All transactions are automatically recorded to provide an audit trail of who accessed the system and when.

"The old system was a nightmare, and we really needed to gain control of the keys," Harrison said. "I very much liked what I saw on the Morse website and called them to find out more."

During the course of the conversation, Harrison was informed that the university's IT department was already using a Morse Watchman's KeyWatcher system. Arrangements were made for him to have a demonstration, after which he placed his initial order for three KeyWatcher cabinets, one each for housekeeping, maintenance and grounds.

For the 300-plus employees in the Maintenance Services Department, the system of accessing keys is now greatly improved, Harrison said.

"Now, at the end of the day, they return their keys to the key cabinet, and the keys stay locked up all night," he said. "They take them out again the next day after clocking in. It keeps the keys onsite where they need to be. We can do audits so we always know where the keys are, we can change access schedules for vacationing staff and we can even lock out terminated employees so the keys remain secure. The system has eliminated the problems we had and streamlined our key control procedures."

KEY IMPROVEMENTS

Harrison noted that the new system also improved the day-to-day routines of those using it.

"One very interesting change we've noticed is that many staff members no longer remove all of their keys every single day," he said. "They have found that they need their keys only for certain jobs on certain days or for certain operations, so they are leaving the keys in the cabinet and accessing them only when they need to be used. For example, Housing and Residence Life, which has its own maintenance crew, may call on our maintenance staff to help with a particular problem. Now instead of our staff always carrying keys for those residence buildings just in case they are needed, the keys are kept secured in the KeyWatcher cabinet and accessed only when needed. It's another way that the system has significantly reduced the problem of lost keys because they are secured and locked up when not needed."

The key cabinets are configured with a card reader that allows university employees to use the same pass as the one they use to clock in and clock out, avoiding the problem of having to use multiple credentials. Also, in configuring the key cabinets, Harrison ordered the standard 2 1/2-inch size key ring that would accommodate up to 25 keys. Master keys that are used for emergency situations only are secured on specialty key rings and have limited staff access.

"An average key ring will have anywhere from 5 to 15 keys on it, and because there are so many buildings on campus, it's a lot of keys that must be carried and stored—easily into the thousands," he said.

KEY CONTROL

After the initial programming was complete, two additional senior staff members were given administrative rights for their respective area/staff. Along with Harrison, the Fiscal Services manager and Housekeeping manager (who has the biggest turnover in staff and the greatest need on a daily basis to make changes) are also authorized to make changes from their own computers. The data is backed up to one server at a main location so that all three see exactly the same data and when any one of them makes changes.

Using the KeyWatcher software, usage reports are run on a weekly basis for review of the past week's activity. If issues are noted regarding alarm, usage patterns or other questionable matters, Harrison can investigate further to see names, key rings and so on to determine more specific details.

Based on the success of the initial implementation, the department has added four key cabinets to the system that were installed in various locations on the university campus, all of which are remotely programmed and controlled by Harrison.

"We're starting to roll this out even more because it's worked so well for our facilities department," he said. "It's turned out to be a model for the university, and so far we've had our university police department come over and look at it as well as our Housing and Residence Life group and several of our extension sites, one of which, Owensboro, went ahead with a purchase. Even the IT department has added another key cabinet to their system."

Harrison noted that while it is possible for him to control the Owensboro system because it is IP addressable, the satellite campus will maintain local administrative control.

"Based on our experience, it should be very easy for Owensboro or any other department within the university to have the system be up and running with minimal difficulty," he said. "Morse Watchmans is very responsive, and any time we have had to call with a technical question, they have been extremely knowledgeable and courteous. It's been just a great experience all around."

***Ralph C. Jensen** is Editor-in-Chief of* Security Products.